



V I T A L Y B I A N K I

RED HILL



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Chirp was a young red-headed sparrow. When he became a year old he married Chirpie and decided to set up house.

"But, darling, where can we build our nest?" Chirpie asked in their sparrow language. "All the tree hollows in our garden are occupied."

"Small matter!" Chirp replied cockily in the same sparrow language, of course. "We'll drive out our neighbours and take their hollow."

Chirp loved fighting and jumped at this chance to show Chirpie what a brave chap he was. And before his shy young wife could stop him, he rushed to the big mountain ash where the hollow was occupied by another young sparrow.

The owner was not at home, and Chirp said to himself: "I'll get into the hollow and when he comes back I'll start screaming that he's trying to seize my home. The old sparrows will come flying, and we'll give him what for!"

He had quite forgotten that his neighbour was married and that his wife had been working on their nest for five days.



Chirp poked his head into the hole, and got a painful peck on the nose. He sprang back. And there was the master of the house himself attacking him from behind. With loud cries they clashed in the air, fell on the ground, and rolled into the ditch.

Chirp was a great fighter, and his opponent was already weakening.

The noise brought the old sparrows from all over the garden. It did not take them long to tell right from wrong, and they gave Chirp such a trouncing that he barely escaped from them with his life.

He came to in a clump of bushes where he had never been before. He ached all over.



Chirpie was sitting beside him, and the poor dear looked terribly frightened.

"Chirp, Chirp darling, we can never go back to our garden now!" She spoke so brokenly that Chirp would have surely burst into tears, if sparrows could cry. "Where are we going to hatch our young now?"



He knew very well that from now on he must keep out of the old sparrows' sight or they'd peck him to death. Still, he did not want Chirpie to see that he was afraid. And so he smoothed down his tousled feathers with his beak, pulled himself together, and said with his old carefree air:

"Small matter! We'll find ourselves another place, and a better one too!" And they set off to look for a new place to live.

Just behind the bushes there was a jolly, blue river, and on the opposite side the bank rose in a very, very steep hill made of red clay and sand. Near the top of this hill there were lots of little holes and burrows. Magpies and windhovers



sat in couples in front of the big holes, and swallows kept darting in and out of the smaller ones.

"Look, what fun they're having," Chirpie said, pointing to the flock of swallows racing this way and that. "Let's build our nest here too."



Chirp glanced nervously at the magpies and windhovers. "It's all right for the swallows, they dig their own nests in the sand. And what am I supposed to do? Start a fight to grab someone else's nest?" He ached all over again at the mere thought.



"No, I don't like it here," he said. "It's too noisy."

And they flew on.

Now they came to a grove, and beyond this grove they saw a cottage and a barn.

Chirp and Chirpie alighted on the roof of the barn, and the first thing Chirp noticed was that there were no swallows or sparrows about.

"Living will be fine here!" Chirp said happily. "See all those seeds and crumbs scattered all over the yard? We'll be by ourselves here, and we won't let anyone else in."

"Oh, Chirp, look at that horrible monster over there, on the porch!" Chirpie said in a terrified whisper.

The monster was Ginger, the fat Tom Cat, and true enough he was sleeping on the porch.

"Small matter!" Chirp said bravely. "What harm can he do us? Watch me give him one!"

He jumped off the roof and made straight for the monster, so recklessly that Chirpie cried out in alarm.

Taking the cat by surprise, Chirp very deftly snatched a bit of bread right from under his nose, and was back on the roof again.

Ginger did not even stir, he only opened one eye and gave the cheeky sparrow a keen look.

"You saw me? And you're scared!" Chirp said, almost strutting.

Chirpie did not want to quarrel, and together they started looking for a good place to build their nest. They decided on the large slit right under the eaves, and went to work at once, fetching bits of straw first, then horsehair, down and feathers.



In less than a week's time, Chirpie laid her first egg—a pretty little egg covered with pinkish brown flecks. Chirp was so happy that he made up a song to his wife and himself.

Tweet-tweet, Chirpie, Chirp!
Chirpie, Chirp,
Tweet, tweet, tweet!

The words did not mean a thing, but it was a nice song to sing when one went hopping along the fence.

When Chirpie had six eggs in her nest, she sat down to hatch them.



Chirp flew off to collect worms and flies for his wife because she needed soft, rich food now. He took a long time, and Chirpie peeped out to see if he was coming.

A paw with outspread claws reached out for her the moment she poked her nose out of the slit. Chirpie wrenched herself free, leaving a whole bunch of feathers in the cat's claws. What a narrow escape!

The cat gave her a glare, thrust his paw into the slit and dragged out the whole nest. In vain Chirpie screamed, in vain Chirp threw himself at the cat—no one came to their aid. The robber calmly ate all the six eggs. The wind easily lifted the empty nest and flung it down on the ground.





That same day, Chirp and Chirpie left the barn forever, and moved to the grove, out of the cat's reach.

Here they were lucky to find an empty tree hollow. Once again they started fetching bits of straw and feathers; and toiled for a whole week, building a new nest.

Their nextdoor neighbours were Mr. and Mrs. Finch, Mr. and Mrs. Flycatcher, and Mr. and Mrs. Goldfinch. Each couple had its own home, there was plenty of food for all, and still Chirp managed to pick a quarrel with them—for no reason really, simply because he loved a fight and wanted to show them how brave and strong he was.

Of the three males, the Finch proved stronger than Chirp and taught him a good lesson. Chirp took care now: he no longer spoiled for a fight, and merely fluffed out his feathers and shouted something saucy when one of his neighbours flew past. This did not make them angry, because they themselves liked to boast of their strength and bravery in front of other birds.

The first to raise the alarm was the Finch. Although he lived farthest from the sparrows, Chirp heard his loud warning cry: Rium-pink-pink! Rium-pink-pink!

"Chirpie, come here quickly," he cried. "Hear the Finch's warning—there's danger!"

Indeed, someone frightening was creeping up on them. The Goldfinch now gave the alarm, and after him the Flycatcher. The enemy must be quite close if the Flycatcher could see him, because his home was only four trees away from Chirp's.





Chirpie flew out of the tree hollow and perched on the branch beside her husband. Their neighbours had warned them of the approaching danger, and they were prepared to face whatever was coming.

They caught the flicker of fluffy ginger fur in the bushes, and their mortal enemy — Tom Cat — stepped out into the clearing. Tom Cat saw that the sparrows had been warned by their neighbours, and there was no catching Chirpie in her nest. He was very angry.

Suddenly the tip of his tail began to twitch in the grass, and his eyes narrowed into slits. Tom Cat must have seen their tree hollow. Six sparrow eggs for breakfast wasn't so bad, after all. He licked his lips, climbed up the tree, and reached into the hollow.

Chirp and Chirpie raised a scream for all the grove to hear. Again no one came to their aid. Their neighbours kept to their nests, screaming loudly from fear. Each couple was worried about the safety of its own home.

Tom Cat got his claws into the nest and pulled it out.

But this time he came too early; Chirpie had not laid any eggs yet.

Finding none, he threw the nest down in disgust, and slipped down to the ground. The sparrows screamed at him as he walked away.

He stopped when he came to the bushes, turned round and all but said: "Just you wait, my pretty birds, just you wait! I'll get you yet. Fix up a new nest wherever you like, hatch your chicks, and I'll come anyway and gobble them up, and you, too, for good measure!" He gave such an angry snort, that Chirpie trembled.

Tom Cat went away, and Chirp and Chirpie were left to grieve over their ravished nest.



"Chirp, I'm sure I'll lay an egg in a few days' time," Chirpie spoke at last. "Let's go quickly and find a place to live somewhere across the river. We'll be safe from Tom Cat there."

She did not know there was a bridge across the river, and that Tom Cat often used it. Chirp did not know this either.

"Let's go," he said.

And off they flew.

Very soon they came to Red Hill.

"Come and stay with us!" the swallows called out to the sparrows in their own language. "Ours is a friendly, gay community!"

"That's what you say, but I bet you'll start a fight with us," Chirp said sulkily.





"Why should we fight?" the swallows replied. "There are enough midges here for everyone, and there are lots of empty holes here, on Red Hill, just pick your choice!"

"And what about the windhovers? And the magpies?" Chirp went on.

"The windhovers feed on the grasshoppers and mice they catch out in the fields. They don't bother us. We're all good friends."

"We went everywhere, Chirp, but a nicer spot than this we never saw," said Chirpie. "Let's stay here."

"Oh well," Chirp said, giving in. "We might give it a try, seeing there are some empty holes and nobody's going to fight."

They flew close to the bank and, true enough, no one molested them—neither the windhovers, nor the magpies.

They went to have a look at the vacant holes, and found two to their liking—they were not too deep, and had a wide opening.



In one of them they built the nest where Chirpie was to hatch her eggs, and in the other one, which was close beside it, Chirp was to sleep at night.

The swallows, magpies and windhovers had long hatched their eggs. Chirpie alone still brooded in her dark nest. Chirp was busy from morning till night bringing her nice things to eat.

A fortnight passed. Tom Cat did not show up, and the sparrows forgot all about him.

Chirp could not wait for the chicks to hatch. Every time he brought Chirpie a worm or a fly he asked:

"Not knocking yet?"

"No, not yet."

"Will they be much longer?"

"No, just a little longer," Chirpie replied patiently.

And then, one morning, Chirpie called to him from the nest:

"Come quickly! One has knocked!"

Chirp came flying. In one of the eggs the chick was knocking at the shell with his feeble little beak. The sound was faint, but he heard it.



Chirpie broke the shell in several places to help her chick. It took him a few minutes to finish the job, and now he showed from the egg — a tiny, blind, plucked-looking chick, with a big head wobbling on a very, very thin neck.

"Isn't he funny!" Chirp exclaimed.

"He's not funny at all," Chirpie said touchily. "He's a very pretty chick. Make yourself useful and chuck those eggshells as far from the nest as you can."

By the time Chirp came back, a second chick had hatched, and one more had begun to knock.

It was in that precise moment that panic swept Red Hill.

From their nest the sparrows heard the shrill cries of the swallows.

Chirp jumped outside and returned at once with the awful news that Tom Cat was scrambling up the bank.

"He saw me!" Chirp cried. "He'll be here before we know it, and he'll get us together with the chicks. Be quick, let's fly away from here!"

"I'm not coming," Chirpie replied sadly. "I can't leave my chicks. Whatever will be, will be."

She remained deaf to Chirp's calls, and did not budge.

And then Chirp flew out of their hole and madly attacked the enemy. But Tom Cat still went on scrambling up the bank. The swallows circled angrily just overhead, the magpies and windhovers joined them, but Tom Cat





quickly made the ledge and
got a clutch at the sparrows'
nest-hole.

All he had to do now was thrust in his other front paw and pull out the nest together with Chirpie, the chicks and the eggs.

And here one of the windhovers pecked his tail and another gave him a hard peck on the head, while two of the magpies struck at his back.



Tom Cat hissed with the pain, swung round to catch the birds with his front paws, but they ducked, and he went tumbling down. There was nothing for him to catch hold of. The sand rolled down together with him, faster and faster all the time.

The birds could not see him in the cloud of red dust rushing down the steep hill. Plop! When the dust had cleared away, they saw Tom Cat's wet head bobbing in the middle of the river, with Chirp hovering behind and pecking it.

Tom Cat swam to the opposite bank and climbed out. Chirp was on to him again, never leaving him alone. Tom Cat had had such a scare, that he did not dare make a grab at the sparrow, and, sticking out his wet tail, galloped home.

He was never seen on Red Hill again.





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